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ABSTRACT

This paper offers leaders in business and education techniques and strategies for encouraging, initiating, and managing business-school partnerships for educational improvement. Such partnerships can help schools impart to their graduates the "skills, judgment, and initiative" needed to keep America's economy strong. Following the foreword and introduction, the first section discusses key elements of a successful partnership: mutual trust and equal sharing of risks and benefits; involvement of top management; access to resources; and a management plan. Several short examples are given of successful business-school partnerships. The next section discusses attitudes and other conditions affecting collaborative efforts. The third section presents steps businesses can take to facilitate partnership-forming. Finally, suggested methods are offered for education leaders to set goals, establish business contacts, and initiate and sustain collaboration. (MCG)

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HOW TO FORM BUSINESS-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

by
Lois Jackson

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FOREWORD

In Washington, D.C., we reached out to our business community a little less than two years ago. Since then, some of the largest corporations in the United States--and many of the most prestigious local industries--have become our partners on behalf of the young people in our city. The generosity of their support has exceeded our most optimistic forecasts.

Why such a strongly favorable response? The primary reason is simple: We started with the commonsense proposition that people form partnerships to reduce costs and reap mutual gains, not to subsidize one another. So we asked for help, not for a handout. We presented preliminary proposals that offered mutual gains--to graduates, parents, business executives and shareholders alike.

We said, "Come, let us reason together." Given current expenses for remediation and training and the schools' similar efforts to equip students with a sound education and work skills--why not pool resources and jointly design programs that produce equal or better returns for each partner, at less cost? After all, this approach--not volunteerism, philanthropy, or window-dressing-- is the classic basis of partnership.

The approach makes leadership and technical support more valued investments from major employers than financial contributions. More important--it requires accountability and risk-taking on the part of all partners. And accountability, coupled with mutual gain, ensures the staying power of the partnership. Our negotiations convinced businesses that our schools are a cost-justified investment in human capital--one that pays off in productivity, profit and growth.

As indicated in the following resource paper, there is no road map for achieving effective partnerships, nor is there a destination that can be called the single best model of collaboration. As the paper further suggests, there are many perceptions, within education and within business, that impede progress and must be substantially adjusted.

There are, however, important characteristics, outlined in the section on Effective Partnerships, that distinguish productive collaborations from the less productive. And, while there is no road map to effective partnership, there are valuable pointers along the way. Many of these are outlined in the sections on The Responsibilities of Business Management and The Responsibilities of School Management.

As a member of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, I hope this resource paper will be reviewed with an eye toward action. As a superintendent who almost every day sees important payoffs for students in effective partnership, I fully commend it to your attention.

Floretta D. McKenzie
Superintendent of Schools
Chief State School Officer
District of Columbia Public Schools

INTRODUCTION

The vitality and economic growth of our nation depend on America's educational performance. Currently, our schools are not producing, in sufficient numbers, graduates who have the skills businesses will need to compete in the international marketplace. "As machines and low-wage labor overseas take over those tasks that demand only speed and accuracy, workers' skill, judgment, and initiative become the determinants of 'business' competitive success'" (Reich, 1983). High-quality education is essential to the development of these attributes.

Action for Excellence, the report of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, proposes that leaders from business, labor, government, science, and education collaborate to improve our public schools and make public education a top priority in the nation. Specifically, the Task Force has recommended that:

1. Each governor, working with state legislators, state and local boards of education, educators, business leaders and others, develop an action plan to improve education throughout the state in all grades.
2. Each corporate and business leader in America work to improve the schools, actively and publicly supporting public education.
3. Leaders outside the traditional educational system--especially business leaders--take direct steps to improve the quality of instruction in the public schools.

The importance of partnerships to mutual understanding, to a more extensive exchange of resources, and to agreement on basic public policy strategies cannot be stressed too strongly. Yet, specific suggestions for how to form business-school partnerships are still relatively few. The purpose of this paper is to share some techniques and strategies that can be used in creating effective partnerships.

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Key Elements

Successful partnerships are based on mutual respect, trust, and confidence. All partners must believe in the mission of the joint venture and see themselves as sharing equally in both risks and benefits. Partnerships cannot be one-way streets, and the participation of business must not be relegated to philanthropy.

Direct demonstrated involvement of top management in business and education helps make partnerships credible. Partners must have access to resources--to people, creative ideas, jobs, training, political influence, experience, money--and the authority to unleash them.

Partnerships require a management plan that establishes a joint and acceptable process for setting goals, determining course and speed, making trade-offs, and evaluating progress. Sustaining interest and getting results from a partnership will depend on how well it is managed, how important the issues are to the partners, how much time is required of partners, how well they are kept informed, whether public confrontation can be avoided, and whether favorable short-term results can be achieved.

Examples

There have already been some extraordinary business-school collaborations for educational improvement, so there is no need to "reinvent the wheel." Partnerships have resulted in new courses, the creation of new schools, curriculum revitalization, staff development opportunities, work-study programs, summer employment for students and teachers, scholarships, and jobs. Just as significant, these efforts have brought businesses and schools together to work toward a common goal.

- o In Washington, D.C., for example, more than 20 national and local businesses and trade associations designed and launched five new four-year high school programs. These programs combine a strong academic program with a career complement.
- o In nine states, a private corporation loaned typewriters and microcomputers to schools in a pilot program that teaches more than 10,000 kindergarteners and first-graders to read by first teaching them to write on a keyboard.
- o In Boston, the schools and the business community recently formed the "Boston Compact," which commits the schools to provide basic skills and local businesses to hire school graduates.
- o In New York, the Comprehensive Math and Science Program, managed by Columbia University and funded by the school system and the private sector, has involved more than 4,000 students in eight years.

- o In Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York, businesses and schools organized business and finance magnet schools.
- o In Indianapolis, the Chamber of Commerce and approximately 500 of its members formed a partnership with the schools to strengthen community support for education.

The following publications contain information about these and other examples of collaborations. Let's Not Reinvent the Wheel: Profiles of School/Business Collaboration by Ian McNett (published by the Institute for Educational Leadership in 1982) presents ten case studies in some detail, pointing out not only how collaborations have been organized and what they have accomplished but also what barriers have stood in the way. The Private Sector Youth Connection (Volume 1: School to Work, A Planning Manual for Educators and Business People), written by Henrietta Schilit and Richard Lacey (published in 1982 by the Vocational Foundation, Inc.) reviews 55 tested school/business partnerships and contains a useful final chapter on "What Makes Programs Work?" Business-School Partnerships: A Plus for Kids, published in 1980 by the National Public Relations Association, does not follow a case-study format but does include useful information about a variety of specific partnerships.

CLIMATE

Following are some observations about the climate in which business/school partnerships are being established. As the growing number of partnerships and joint accomplishments attests, that climate is relatively benign. But understanding the factors that affect the climate, and some of the possibilities for crosswinds or turbulence, nonetheless makes a good starting point for forming new partnerships.

1. The isolation of businesses from schools and schools from businesses has been detrimental to both and has resulted too often in the following misconceptions: business is narrowly profit-motivated, and public education cannot be improved.
2. Some business leaders feel that they are, in effect, paying twice for training and education, first through taxes and then through sponsoring remedial programs for employees.
3. Although many school leaders are willing to seek advice from external sources, some seem to protect the status quo.
4. Concepts of how business can help education are often too narrow. As Floretta McKenzie has said, "Sometimes I feel discouraged that so many of us in public education still see corporate 'involvement' as a matter of volunteerism or philanthropy. Productive working relationships seldom endure without a quid pro quo...It's time for the managers of public resources to stop trying to pick corporate pockets, and to start helping our private sector companies find cost-justified approaches to coupling business' interests of their

share holders with the educational interests of our young people. It's a deal." (McKenzie, 1982)

5. Schools are only beginning to acquire experience in articulating how people outside education can help education.
6. Top management in business sometimes does not acknowledge the extent to which company interests are served by a strong education system. Business people sometimes underestimate the significant commitment of people, time, and money that improving education will require.
7. The interaction of the educational community with other communities has been limited.
8. Because requests for assistance from business come at a time of reductions in public funding for schools, business leaders are concerned that they are being asked to make up for these reductions.
9. The special problems of inner city schools make them an especially appropriate focus of business/school initiatives: "Inner-city school systems should be tied as directly as possible to employment opportunity, with the ultimate aim of being able to hold out the promise of a job if a child stays in school, off the streets, and out of trouble" (Harvard Business Review, 1982).
10. Neither businesses nor schools have realized fully that company training programs constitute a resource that schools could put to good use in staff development.
11. Although business people and educators generally recognize that focusing efforts to improve education exclusively on mathematics and science will not suffice, concern remains that this "Sputnik solution" will be proposed.

Since basic perceptions vary and since business and education still have relatively limited experience in collaborating with each other, clarifying the responsibilities of prospective partners at the outset makes good sense. Discussed below are some of the major responsibilities of business leaders and education leaders.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

The major responsibilities of management are to acknowledge--and communicate to employees--the importance high-quality education holds for business, to encourage employees to become involved in education, to publicly support education and to help the education community revitalize the K-12 curriculum. These responsibilities can be spelled out in somewhat greater detail as follows.

1. Acknowledge vested economic interests in education.

Businesses need to acknowledge that collaborating to improve education serves their economic interests and that investments in education are therefore part of the cost of doing business.

This is not just do-gooder philanthropy we're talking about. It's a chance for Washington's private sector to invest in its future by helping to shape the profile of tomorrow's labor pool. Clearly, business will gain if the school system produces graduates who are better equipped to work in business. And the community as a whole will obviously be better off if more people can find a meaningful role in the regional economy. The new "public-private partnership" can work. What's more, it should work. But don't think of it as just a nice thing to do. Think of it as the smart thing to do" (Regardies, 1982).

2. Let employees know how high-quality education benefits the company.

Using house organs, management bulletins, speeches, and other media, outline the company's interest in education and encourage employees to become involved with their local schools.

3. Revise company policies and practices where appropriate.

Reviewing current policies and practices is often a good way to discover opportunities for contributing to K-12 education. Some companies have, for example, loaned executives to schools, supplied schools with free equipment, and set up programs that let students and teachers visit businesses or business people visit schools.

4. Encourage management to get acquainted with school leaders and participate in efforts to improve K-12 education.

Management should communicate to education leaders the skills graduates need, help set a standard of excellence for the schools, collaborate on projects that enrich the learning experience, and assist in staff development. There may also be opportunities to help schools with financial, personnel, and operational matters not directly related to instruction.

5. Reward excellence in academic achievement, instruction and education leadership.

Educational performance seems likely to remain constant until a new standard of excellence is adopted by all and extraordinary performance is publicly recognized. Businesses can provide financial rewards and scholarships; they can also create other ways to acknowledge outstanding performance.

6. Collaborate with local universities to provide technical training for teachers and develop institutes for education leaders.

Help of this sort can significantly augment otherwise limited budgets for staff development.

7. Help schools integrate current technology into the classroom and the curriculum.

As schools move beyond the traditional lecture-paper-pen format for instruction toward more sophisticated use of computer, telecommunication, and audio-visual technologies, business's considerable experience with these technologies could prove useful. One specific possibility: businesses could give schools access to the wealth of audio-visual materials available in business libraries.

8. Support, where possible, policy and legislation that will provide and fund quality public education.

9. Don't underestimate the challenge.

Efforts to improve K-12 education will not show measurable returns quickly; patience and realistic goals are imperative.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDUCATION MANAGEMENT

Education leaders should start with the premise that businesses want to help but need to understand how to help. Although this puts the education community in a selling posture, potential partners are ready to listen and the examples of successful collaboration are abundant. Because developing and sustaining business-school partnerships can take a great deal of time, energy, and commitment, some school districts--in Washington, D.C., for example, and in St. Louis--have hired project directors with business expertise.

Effective selling requires deciding what you want, setting a strategy for getting what you want and being able to negotiate. Once a partnership arrangement is in place, good program management is needed to sustain collaboration.

Deciding What You Want

Begin by understanding the current and future job market, both nationally and in your region. Do a quick survey to find out which companies are in your region and which are growing.

Take a good look at your school--staff skills, student performance, course requirements, strengths, and weaknesses. (Use your school profile -- or develop one.) Then outline a pilot project that could fill a void and that could be done in collaboration with business

partners. These pilots should have potential for reaching large numbers of students.

Since these outlines should stimulate creative thinking, maximize the resources of prospective partners and make long-term commitments possible, put together the sort of proposal that partners can help shape. You might also want to propose collaborations that involve several companies, thus diffusing risks and responsibilities and possibly increasing the staying power of the partners. Businesses are apt to respond well to innovative proposals that combine courage with common sense.

Where possible, be prepared to offer seed funding for pilot projects. The Washington, D.C., public schools used this approach in a summer externship program for teachers: the superintendent paid approximately 40 teachers to spend three weeks in staff development activities structured by business.

Setting a Strategy

1. Acquire a "mentor" in the business community.

As a first step, seek out someone who knows the business community and can test your strategy, ideas, and priorities. If you find such a mentor, he or she will most likely introduce you and your ideas to other business people. If the person is respected in the business world, the result is immediate credibility and easy access to the community. To nurture these relationships, you must keep mentors informed, and perform as promised.

2. Understand prospective partners before you contact them.

If you understand the motivations, priorities and limitations of prospective partners, you will have a sound basis for communication. (See Actions for Business, Industry and Labor, a brochure that is available from ECS, for a listing of steps leaders in these areas propose to take to improve education.)

3. Go straight to the top of the company.

Go to the chairman of the board, the president, or a senior vice-president. "This direct approach takes more time initially, but it pays off in the long run: Whatever you need after that will be done far more quickly" (The Executive Educator, 1983).

4. Address the issue of quality at the outset.

Since business is concerned that students can graduate from high school without competency in reading, writing and thinking--and since business seems to take a dimmer view of the work-readiness of graduates than educators (Center for Public Resources, 1983) school leaders should emphasize the efforts schools are already making to improve educational quality.

5. Point out that business has a vested economic interest in education.

Emphasize the widening gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged in this country and the new skills workers will need to meet the demands of a changing economy.

6. Dispel the illusion that you are proposing to fill the gap created by cutbacks in education budgets.

Stress the value of "in-kind" contributions and emphasize how much can be done at the outset with expertise instead of cash. Among the possible in-kind contributions: assisting with staff development, identifying the skills students need for productive employment, helping integrate technology into the curriculum, providing career guidance.

7. Allay the fears some businesses have about dealing with the public sector.

Some businesses are concerned about being confronted by school boards or going public before projects are off to a good start. Some wish to maintain a low profile and want to be consulted before their participation is made public. Assure your potential partners that you will keep them informed.

8. Provide examples of effective collaboration between business and schools.

"Reference-selling" is an effective technique, particularly when the concept of business-school partnerships is new to the prospective partner.

9. Ask for a commitment.

Once you have laid out what you propose to do in a management plan that sets target dates, try to get an immediate commitment to begin working on the details with designated staff.

10. Be results-oriented, responsive and timely.

Point out how the actions you propose directly affect children. Follow up promptly on issues raised in initial meetings. Deliver what you promise, by the time you promise.

Negotiating

If you use analogies that relate what you propose to the experience of prospective partners, understand what the prospective partners need and want and match your request to their needs and desires, you can negotiate effectively. A mentor can be most valuable in aiding negotiations, particularly if you are not familiar with the business

community, because he or she can help you anticipate the needs and motivations of business and fine-tune your strategy.

Sustaining Collaboration

Business and industry want to support programs that work. The challenge for the education community is to demonstrate its ability to produce results. Sustained collaboration will require the following:

1. Management plans should be made for projects. Time schedules should be explicit, as should evaluation procedures.
2. Goals, priorities, and schedules should be set jointly. Agreement should be reached about what constitutes success. Partners should establish formal checkpoints to identify what needs to be done, assign leadership responsibility, choose business staff who can help coordinate the project, discuss progress and readjust.
3. Ideally, communications should be ongoing and informal so that several matters can be resolved in a single phone call. Keep partners apprised of developments and solicit opinions between formal checkpoints. Strive to minimize surprises.
4. Use time efficiently. Schedule meetings far in advance; send reminders and preliminary agendas. Start meetings on time and keep them short. Be as succinct as possible in presentations--remember that proof is not as important initially as the feasibility of an idea and its potential benefits. Packaging proposals in executive summary format is often effective.
5. Once you gain commitment, be ready to follow up. Be creative about breaking log jams within the educational structure--get the superintendent and other leaders involved to shorten turn-around times. Striking one partnership deal at a time makes good sense, since you should deliver results as soon as possible after you have generated excitement.

Once you have developed confidence in these collaborations, you can often begin developing a project at the same time as you are seeking partners. Try not to wait until a sale is complete to begin work--if you have a good idea, you probably should do it with or without partners.

OUTLOOK

Partnerships are possible and necessary--now. "A real emergency is upon us," concluded the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth in Action for Excellence: "we must act now, individually and together."

Americans have a history of working together to meet urgent national needs. If we join forces now to improve the quality of education for our young people, we will succeed.

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